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ABSTRACT

This monograph is designed to acquaint classroom teachers with the language proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the oral testing guidelines of the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The guidelines are intended for language proficiency assessment by the oral interview technique. Designated pages are to be used as a pull-out manual before and after testing for illustrating how informal oral language proficiency assessment (OLPA) interviews are conducted. An introductory section discusses the need for OLPA, the interview technique, the history of oral language proficiency testing, terms and definitions, and caveats and common concerns. Three subsequent chapters examine proficiency levels (the rating scale and components of proficiency levels, and the ACTFL generic speaking descriptions), interviewing (techniques and procedures, interviewer bias and mistakes, and checklists, formats, and other suggestions), and student variables (ages and developmental stages, cultural and environmental factors, and personal and affective characteristics). The ACTFL proficiency guidelines, additional test descriptions, and a brief reference list are appended. (MSE)

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# INFORMAL ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT

Teacher Training Monograph No. 3

Teacher Training Project for
Bilingual and English to Speakers
of Other Languages Teachers

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Project Director

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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# PREFACE

The purpose of this monograph is to acquaint classroom teachers with the Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), publisher of Foreign Language Annals, a journal for foreign and second language educators. The Proficiency Guidelines are to be used in assessing the oral language proficiency of students in foreign language and second language programs by means of the oral interview technique.

Designated pages in this monograph are to be used as a pull out manual for illustrating how informal oral language proficiency assessment interviews are conducted. The oral language proficiency assessment (OLPA) manual, which is comprised of the several yellow pages, may be used by the interviewer before and after interviews. Although special training is required to conduct formal interviews, a familiarization with the ACTFL guidelines and the oral interview technique can aid classroom teachers and others in informally assessing students' speaking ability.

The authors are grateful to David Hiple and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages for granting permission to use the guidelines and information from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Oral Proficiency Testing Manual.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## Need for oral language proficiency assessment (OLPA)

There has been an increasing emphasis in recent years on the importance of teaching and evaluating oral proficiency skills in all foreign and second language programs. Traditional foreign language programs for students whose first language was English included listening comprehension, reading, writing, speaking, and culture. Yet historically in the United States students have not left these programs as fluent speakers of the target language. Many teachers and students sought ways to include more real life situations as part of classroom work and extracurricular activities whereby the spoken language could be nurtured and developed. Political, social, and technological changes in the last 30 years have contributed to the need to produce graduates who could not only understand these changes and implement new ideas, but who could also communicate effectively in languages other than English. Research has established that there is a relationship between an individual's ability to communicate and that person's ability to function in a society.

In addition, as more and more limited English proficient students were identified in communities all across America, the educational system accepted the task of providing these students with an education through various types of second language programs such as bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs. The immediacy of accommodating large numbers

of limited English proficient students meant more than measuring students' language ability and achievement by traditional means of paper and pencil tests. It was necessary that students speak the language. Educators had to provide experiences through which effective speaking would occur and also be able to measure students' progress for placement purposes. It was necessary to insure not only that oral communication was taking place, but that it was also the vehicle by which students were learning the cognitive and affective skills to progress in school settings. Teachers need to know their students' oral second language proficiency skills, then, as a vital indicator of students' current and future progress in school.

Proficiency based teaching and learning are now receiving greater attention. Several research findings have important implications for proficiency-based language curricula and instruction (Van Patten, 1986).

1. <u>For successful language acquisition, learners need access to input which is communicatively or meaningfully oriented</u>. According to Krashen's (1982) Monitor Theory, children and adults acquire language over time simply by being exposed to meaningful, comprehensible input. Krashen claims that the conscious teaching of grammar has dubious value. He claims that many language classes are input-poor environments where learners have little opportunity to speak with conversational partners who are native speakers and who are

also trained in ways to provide comprehensible input at appropriate levels.

2. Learners of a given second language tend to pass through certain transitional stages of grammatical competence. These stages include negation, WH-question formation, WH-embedding and morphological phenomena such as plural formation, reflexives, and present tense inflection. The stages suggest certain universal tendencies in how particular constructions are acquired over time. The implication of this finding is that teachers need to be aware that students are equipped with certain internal processing mechanisms that organize language independently of overt instruction. Van Patten (1986) suggests that teachers let these stages run their course without undue emphasis on direct grammar instruction particularly with beginning second language students. Making students aware of this natural process also makes them more comfortable as they attempt to speak.

3. Improvement in linguistic accuracy and overall proficiency is more a result of motivation and other affective factors in the learner rather than other factors. Language teachers are aware that the lack of a second language social group influences language learning and that social interaction affects motivation. Motivation is affected when the second language holds particular status, positive or negative, in the minds of the learners. Teachers should not expect miracles from contrived social settings but must be aware that students

may acquire more second language in interactions with others than in traditional grammar oriented classrooms.

4. Direct error correction by the instructor does not promote linguistic accuracy and the absence of error correction in the early stages of acquisition does not impede the development of linguistic accuracy. This is a provocative finding for language teachers and one that is debated by teachers, students, and researchers alike. Van Patten (1986) maintains that those who adhere to overt correction of errors may be responding to the pressure of getting immediate results, a necessary pressure imposed by the way our educational systems are set up. Much of education demands that teachers proceed along easily charted paths, document progress, and outline behavioral objectives. Teachers are often judged by their ability to impart information and measure that information in their students and be accountable. In this approach, error correction is one way to ensure that we are doing our job. It does not always correlate, however, with what a student actually knows and does with language. This is not to say that pointing out errors, particularly those that inhibit communication, is not warranted. It is to say, however, that overt correction of errors is not a necessary requirement for beginning language learners.

5. Teachers must have a high sense of efficacy. In order to implement the research findings cited above, it is necessary to have facilitative teaching/learning environments

and teachers who believe they can teach and reach any child in such environments. Teachers' sense of efficacy, which refers to teachers' judgment of their capability to perform in their teaching situations, has been lowered in recent years by many factors such as lack of administrative support, poor working conditions, low salary, and societal changes (Ashton & Webb, 1986; McNeely, 1985). Other factors such as too many students, too many preparations, and too many administrative requirements, have contributed to low teacher morale and job dissatisfaction. It follows that teachers whose professional efforts are thwarted may begin to lessen their expectations of themselves and their students. Helpful teaching/evaluating tools and materials contribute to high teacher sense of efficacy. The following is a description of one such tool developed specifically for second language teachers.

The ACTFL/ETS oral interview technique

The oral interview technique proposed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a test of an individual's second language speaking ability that offers second language classroom teachers a means by which oral proficiency skills may be evaluated (Educational Testing Service Oral Proficiency Testing Manual, 1982). It is a 10- to 30-minute, face to face conversation that results in a notable speech sample based on specific guidelines and is a test of functional language ability, not a discrete-point test of knowledge about the language. The complete ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, located

in Appendix I, offer both a conceptual framework and a professional vocabulary to help toward teaching for proficiency and provide the organizing principle in second language teaching (Higgs, 1985).

Proficiency levels or ranges of skill were determined by research and experienced based techniques and with practice teachers can master the basic components of each level and are able to conduct the interview as a spontaneous, informal conversation. Other instruments do exist for assessing oral language proficiency skills. A brief description of some of these currently in use is located in Appendix II. Part II of this discussion of the ACTFL/ETS oral interview technique provides a complete description of the speaking proficiency levels and rating scales, and Part III describes the interview process itself. Part IV discusses pertinent information relative to school age limited English proficient students that is important for second language oral proficiency assessment.

History of oral language proficiency testing

During World War II foreign language capability became a pressing national concern and language training was intensified in the U.S. at such sites as the Army Language School in California (ETS OP Testing Manual, 1982). This training for functional language proficiency continued after the war primarily in government agencies to prepare personnel for foreign service positions worldwide. Linguists at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Language School developed a

rating scale to describe speaking ability and formulated an interview based evaluation procedure for rating oral language proficiency. The interview and rating guidelines were devised to be independent of any program of studies. This scale was adopted by other major agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency.

In 1955 the FSI developed an oral proficiency rating scale that extends from Level 0 (for no practical proficiency) to Level 5 (for performance equivalent to that of an educated native speaker)(ENS)(Buck & Hiple, 1984). The scale, shown on page 8, also includes plus levels for a total of eleven different ranges of skill. Known as the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) definitions, the scale is now the standard for language proficiency ratings in government agencies.

In the 1960s, Educational Testing Service (ETS) personnel were trained by FSI to use the oral interview, and the U.S. State Department contracted ETS to train oral proficiency testers for the Peace Corps. For 20 years ETS has conducted tester training programs and has overseen the testing of thousands of volunteers in more than 60 languages (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984b).

In 1979 the ETS received funding from the Department of Education to investigate the establishment of a common yardstick of performance standards that could be used in academic environments (Buck & Hiple, 1984). It was decided that a modified form of the 0 to 5 government scale would be useful in school settings.

| ILR Scale |
| --- |
| 5<br>native or bilingual proficiency |
| 4+ |
| 4<br>distinguished proficiency |
| 3+ |
| 3<br>professional proficiency |
| 2+ |
| 2<br>limited working proficiency |
| 1+ |
| 1<br>elementary proficiency |
| 0+ |
| 0<br>no practical proficiency |

Application of the oral interview procedure was extended in the early 1970s to the municipal and state levels and bilingual education and ESL/ESOL programs were initiated with teachers being trained specifically for these programs. Several states, including Florida, have enacted an oral proficiency requirement for the certification of bilingual education teachers. In addition, religious and business organizations have also used facets of the oral interview procedure to train missionaries and representatives respectively. In recent years there has been a major thrust in government, academic, and business circles toward oral proficiency in second language programs. This has required revamping curricula, materials, and evaluation.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, developed with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, consist of descriptions of proficiency levels not only in oral skills but also in listening, reading, writing, and culture (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984a). The guidelines were developed in part as a response to a recommendation of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979) report to establish language proficiency achievement goals with special attention to speaking proficiency. This report, while addressing what it described as America's isolationist moat mentality, had important implications for all second language programs. The nation's responsibilities and opportunities as a major world power mandated the necessity to encourage and support functional knowledge of other languages and cultures.

Implicit in such a mandate is the necessity to offer methodologies to impart this knowledge and assess the impact on students' ability to function. This second language concept applies not only to the teaching of foreign languages but also to the teaching of English to nonnative speakers of English.

Terms and definitions

The need for specific guidelines for oral language proficiency assessment also brought about organizing principles that led to common acronyms and definitions that all practitioners might use in order to communicate in the same professional language. Research and literature in second language teaching and learning continue to wrestle with basic definitions for such concepts as bilingualism and oral proficiency. The oral interview procedures as proposed by the ACTFL guidelines also include working vocabulary that teachers and researchers alike may use to avoid confusion. It is important in oral interview technique, for instance, to have a common understanding of the difference between achievement testing and proficiency testing. Achievement testing is anchored to a particular curriculum or program of study. Proficiency testing is testing language competence that indicates general knowledge and life experience, not necessarily related to instruction (Buck and Hiple, 1984).

It is also important to define foreign language education and second language education. Foreign language education is teaching a language that is not native to the students and

providing instruction within a social and geographical environment where the target language is not the predominant language (Jaeger, 1985). Second language education is teaching a language that is not native to the students and providing instruction within a social and geographical environment where the target language is the predominant language (Jaeger, 1985).

The value of proficiency tests is that they measure real-life language ability to survive not only in classrooms but also in the world. Proficiency testing is not discrete point testing, that is, testing the separate skills that make up a person's total language competence. These and other terms and definitions used in this monograph are taken from the ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual and from other sources.

Caveats and Questions

The provisional nature of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, while offering common terminology and assessment standards, carries with it the need for further discussion and refinement. Implications must be considered for how these guidelines can realistically be used in classrooms and what changes made in curriculum and instruction materials. The proficiency guidelines are intended to offer a focus not a methodology and in order to implement an increased focus toward oral communication, existing practices, curricula, and materials must be adapted. In these beginning stages the need exists for classroom teachers to have strategies to emphasize

real life language based on texts and materials they currently use.

Most importantly, the elements of time, place, and support must be accommodated. Genuine dialog between student and teacher is a time intensive activity. In overcrowded, multilevel, multilanguage classes there is often not enough time to spend with each child in meaningful conversation. This time is essential when a large part of the instructional goal is to assist students in realizing the importance of and gaining confidence in their abilities.

A suitable place to conduct meaningful language teaching, learning, and assessment is also essential yet often unavailable to second language teachers in particular. Many teachers are itinerants, that is, they travel from place to place, both within a school and among many schools and school districts. The actual physical location of language learning activities is an important and often overlooked accommodation due in part to the pull out nature of many programs and the lack of permanency associated with these programs.

Support is essential, not only in terms of administrative, collegial, and parental aid, but also in terms of resources and materials. Sound pedagogy rests on the inclusion of support personnel in the classroom as well, people who are themselves vehicles through which students may practice and refine their oral communication skills to assist classroom teachers in meeting the goals they know they can

reach when provided with the three essential elements of time, place, and support.

Questions to be answered include those asked by Schulz (1986) and Lantolf & Frawley (1985):

1. What changes will have to be made in order to make this major switch from a grammar-based achievement syllabus to one based on proficiency?
2. How realistic is it to expect that the guidelines can be implemented under the limitations of current instructional settings?
3. How can subjective biases of the interviewer be overcome?
4. What techniques help to overcome the obstacle of obtaining an effective language sample from a shy or unmotivated student?
5. How can the guidelines be used effectively if they are admittedly provisional?
6. How are nonverbal factors such as the use of gestures to communicate and convey meaning rather than oral language considered?
7. How can it be assumed the student will perform at the same level in real life encounters?
8. How is progress measured?
9. How much dialectal variation should be ignored?
10. How can there be enough time to conduct such assessment systematically?

These and many other questions must be addressed in order for classroom teachers and others to be able to focus on the goal of oral proficiency.

## II. PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Proficiency here refers to oral language competence that a student uses to indicate general knowledge and life experience, not necessarily language competence that is related to instruction. For that reason, in assessing oral language proficiency it is not important to know how long a person has studied a language or what a student has learned from a program of studies, but what the student can actually do with the language at a given time (Hiple, 1986). The amount of the target language that a student possesses at a given time may be illustrated by a simple triangle (see Figure 1). The oral language of the beginning target language speaker fills the area at the apex. As the student's ability and experience in the target language grow, the amount of language increases exponentially, that is, it increases not only in quality as grammatical constructions are added, but also in quantity as more and more vocabulary is added. The triangle figure will be used throughout the discussion of oral language proficiency assessment to scale the various proficiency levels and sublevels and to designate the other perspectives from which language assesssment must be viewed (Figures 2-4).

### Rating scale and components of proficiency levels

There are several levels of proficiency that serve as indicators of the degree of functioning ability in the target language. The FSI 0 to 5 scale while useful at lower levels needed modification for use in school settings. The levels

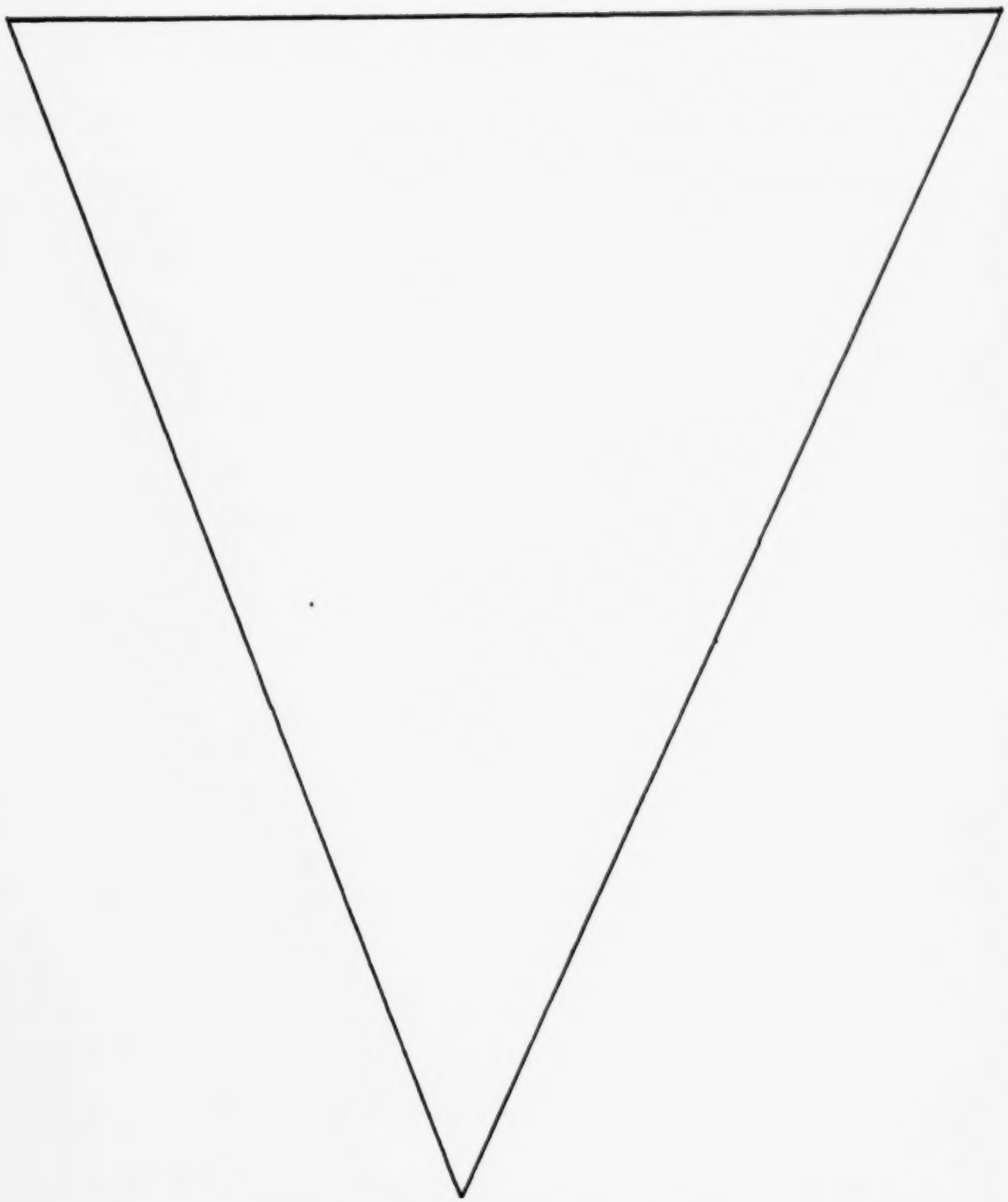

Figure 1. Language Hierarchy

delineated by the ACTFL guidelines provide such modification and are illustrated in the form of a hierarchically arranged triangle (Figure 2). The ACTFL/ETS scale is divided into four major categories separated by major threshold points. These categories are Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. Greater and greater linguistic ability is required in order to move from 0 to 5 (Novice to Superior) on the scale.

Using the FSI rating scale that appears at the left, level 0 includes a range of no ability in the language whatsoever to no functional ability, that is, the speaker is limited to memorized material only. This level corresponds to the ACTFL descriptor Novice on the right side of the figure.

FSI level 1 is defined as elementary (survival-level) proficiency and corresponds to the ACTFL descriptor Intermediate. At this level the speaker can create with the language; ask and answer questions on familiar topics; and is able to get into, through, and out of a simple survival situation.

FSI level 2 is defined as limited working proficiency and corresponds to the ACTFL descriptor Advanced. At this level the speaker can narrate and describe in present, past, and future time and can get into, through, and out of a complicated survival situation.

FSI level 3 is defined as professional working proficiency, level 4 is full professional proficiency, and level 5 is proficiency indistinguishable from that of an

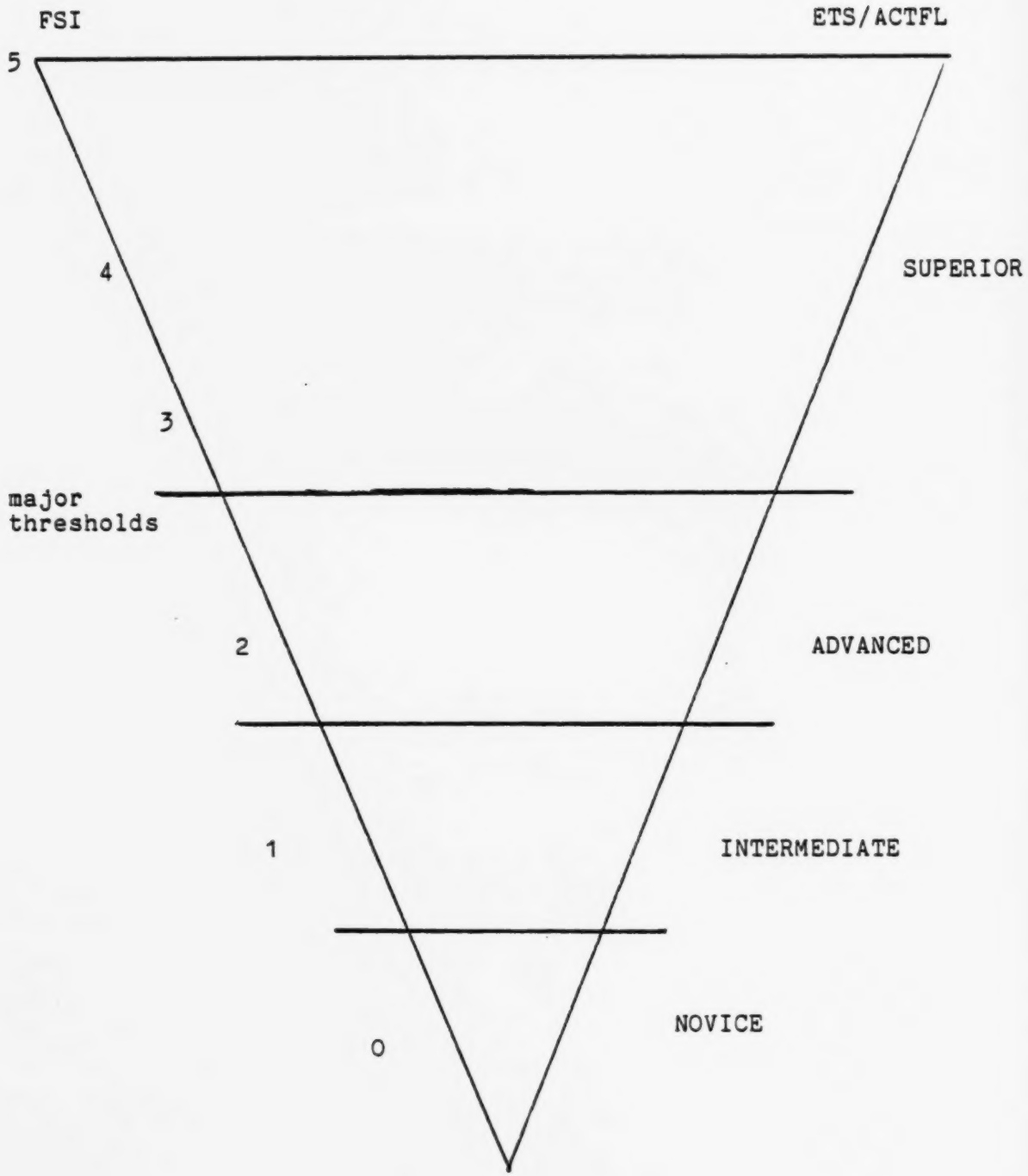


Figure 2. Proficiency Levels

educated native speaker (ENS). Because the FSI scale was designed to assess oral language proficiency of adults' professional ability, the ACTFL scale was modified for use in school settings; consequently, levels 3, 4, and 5 are grouped into one level described as Superior.

Levels divided at major thresholds points are further subdivided at minor threshold points and provide a greater number of definable stages of oral proficiency (see Figure 3). The areas of proficiency are described by the ACTFL Generic Descriptions for Speaking on pages 20 and 21 and are used to assess and rate students' oral language proficiency; these pages also serve as the beginning pages of the OLPA manual.

In assessing oral language proficiency the subdivisions of the levels help to focus further the student's ability. The sublevels low, mid, and high are contained within both the novice and intermediate levels to provide additional proficiency benchmarks so that progress within these two levels can be measured (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984a). The advanced level is subdivided into advanced and advanced plus. It is the superior level that has no subdivisions on the ACTFL scale since, as previously stated, assessing oral language proficiency in school settings does not usually involve superior level students. The lower levels require further description and definition.

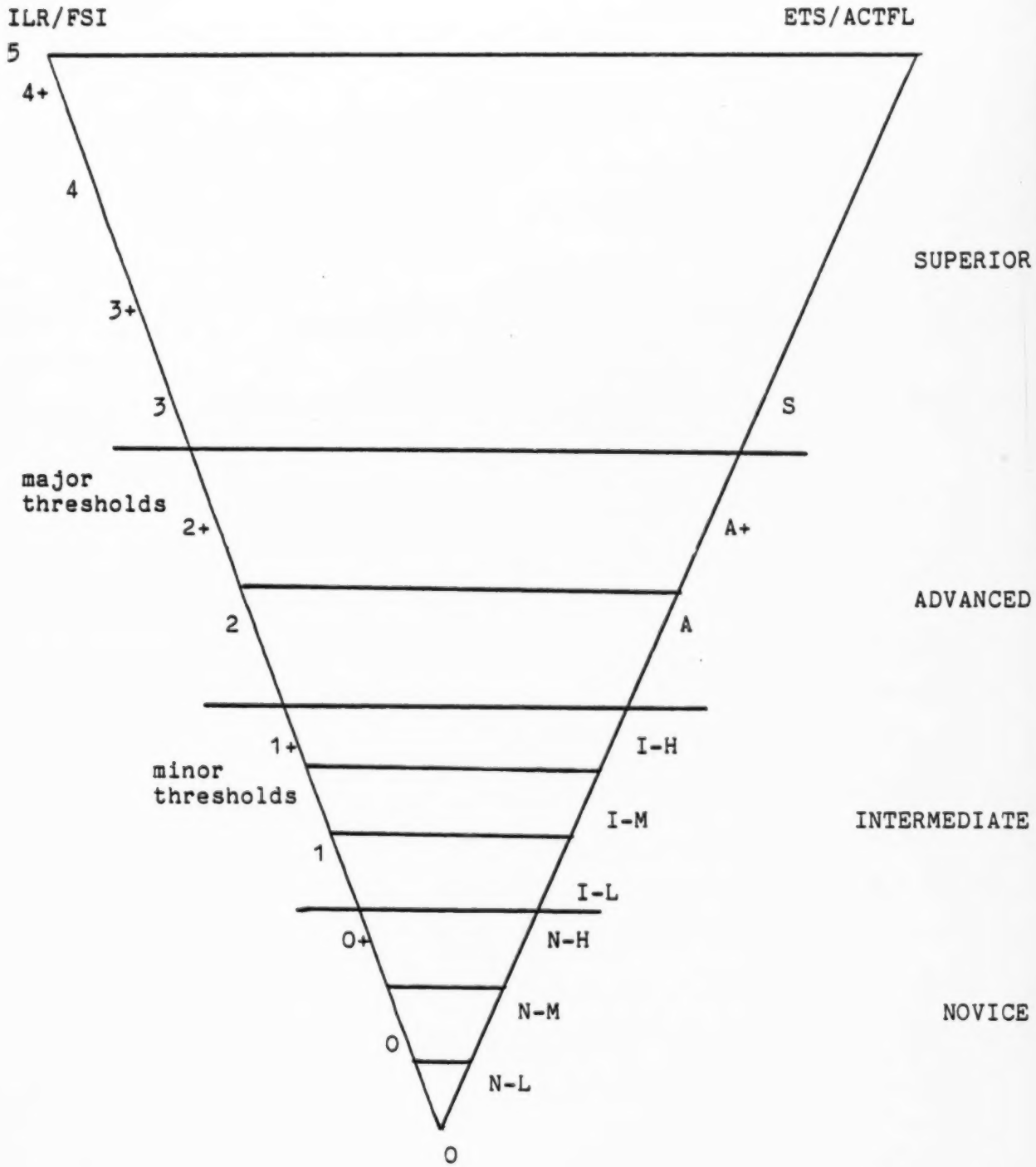


Figure 3. Proficiency Rating Scale

ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES

## Generic Descriptions–Speaking

**Novice** The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material.

Novice-Low Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases. Essentially no functional communicative ability.

Novice-Mid Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quality is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple, elementary needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words. Speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty.

Novice-High Able to satisfy partially the requirements of basic communicative exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through simple recombinations of their elements. Can ask questions or make statements involving learned material. Shows signs of spontaneity although this falls short of real autonomy of expression. Speech continues to consist of learned utterances rather than of personalized, situationally adapted ones. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common kinship terms. Pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. Errors are frequent and, in spite of repetition, some Novice-High speakers will have difficulty being understood even by sympathetic interlocutors.

**Intermediate** The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode;
—initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and
—ask and answer questions.

Intermediate-Low Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-Mid Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-High Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. Limited vocabulary still necessitates hesitation and may bring about slightly unexpected circumlocution. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally by understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.

**Advanced** The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—converse in a clearly participatory fashion;
—initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events;
—satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and
—narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

| | |
|---|---|
| Advanced | Able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced-level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing and circumlocution. Differentiated vocabulary and intonation are effectively used to communicate fine shades of meaning. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate. |
| **Superior** | The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:<br>—participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and<br>—support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies. |
| Superior | Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Can discuss special fields of competence and interest with ease. Can support opinions and hypothesize, but may not be able to tailor language to audience or discuss in depth highly abstract or unfamiliar topics. Usually the Superior level speaker is only partially familiar with regional or other dialectical variants. The Superior level speaker commands a wide variety of interactive strategies and shows good awareness of discourse strategies. The latter involves the ability to distinguish main ideas from supporting information through syntactic, lexical and suprasegmental features (pitch, stress, intonation). Sporadic errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures and some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal writing, but no patterns of error are evident. Errors do not disturb the native speaker or interfere with communication. |

In addition to levels and sublevels, another consideration in oral proficiency assessment is the Functional Trisection (ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual, 1982) (see Figure 4). In assigning ratings, the interviewer considers the student's overall or global speaking performance. This means that the student must be able to function in specified contexts with suitable accuracy. The student's language must be viewed, then, from three different perspectives:

(1) function or specific task the student must perform, such as asking questions or giving information.

(2) context or subject matter or situation the student must address or deal with, and

(3) accuracy or degree of intelligibility of grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and sociolinguistic-culture factors that the student demonstrates.

We need to ask not only "Was the student able to communicate?" but more importantly "What was the student able to communicate and how well?" (Higgs & Clifford, 1982). The "what" requires consideration of both function and context and the "how well" requires considerations of degree of accuracy.

The Functional Trisection for oral proficiency assessment enables the interviewer to make a global assessment and also provides for balance in test design and curriculum development (Omaggio, 1984). Detailed information for each area of the Functional Trisection follows.

OLPA Manual, p. 3

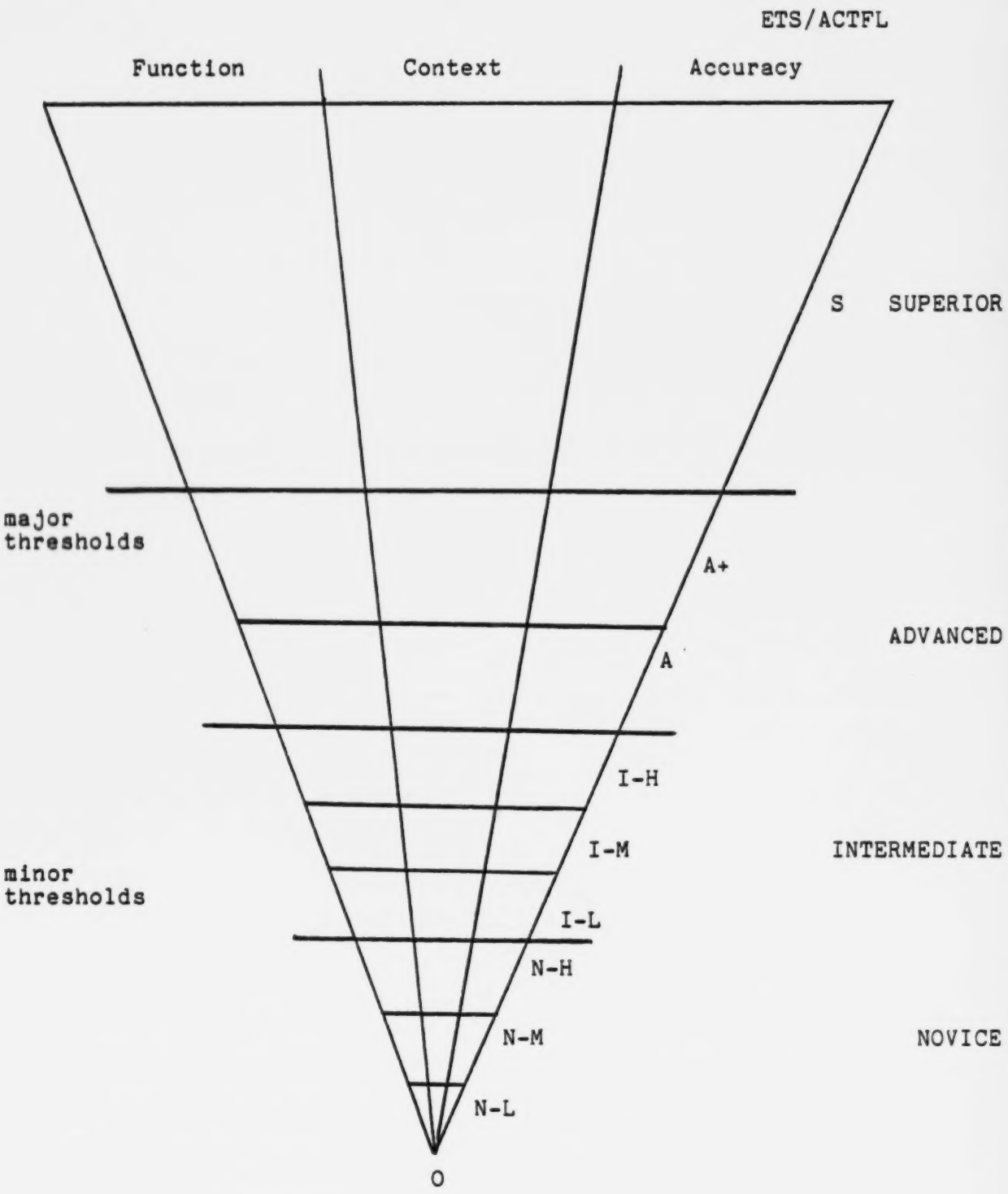


Figure 4. Proficiency Rating Scale with Functional Trisection

OLPA Manual, p. 4

## FUNCTIONAL TRISECTION OF ORAL PROFICIENCY LEVELS

| Oral Proficiency Level | Function (Tasks accomplished, attitudes expressed, tone conveyed) | Context (Topics, subject areas, activities, and jobs addressed) | Accuracy (Acceptability, quality, and accuracy of message conveyed) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 (Superior) | Functions equivalent to an educated native speaker (ENS). | All subjects. | Performance equivalent to an ENS. |
| 4 (Superior) | Able to tailor language to fit audience, counsel, persuade, negotiate, represent a point of view and interpret for dignitaries. | All topics normally pertinent to professional needs. | Nearly equivalent to an ENS. Speech is extensive, precise, appropriate to every occasion with only occasional errors. |
| 3 (Superior) | Can converse in formal and informal situations, resolve problem situations, deal with unfamiliar topics, provide explanations, describe in detail, offer supported opinions, and hypothesize. | Practical, social, professional and abstract topics, particular interests, and special fields of competence. | Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker. Only sporadic errors in basic structures. |
| 2 (Advanced) | Able to fully participate in casual conversations, can express facts, give instructions, describe, report, and provide narration about current, past and future activities. | Concrete topics such as own background, family, interests, work, travel, and current events. | Understandable to native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners, sometimes miscommunicates. |
| 1 (Intermediate) | Can create with the language, ask and answer questions, participate in short conversations. | Everyday survival topics and courtesy requirements. | Intelligible to native speaker used to dealing with foreigners. |
| 0* (Novice) | No functional ability. | None. | Unintelligible. |

* Novice Level is not discussed here.

OLPA Manual, p. 5

## FUNCTIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| 4 (Superior) | Represents point of view<br>Negotiates<br>Persuades<br>Counsels<br>Tailors language to audience |
| 3 (Superior) | Handles unfamiliar topics or situations<br>Hypothesizes<br>Provides supported opinion |
| 2 (Advanced) | Gets into, through and out of survival situations with a complication<br>Narrates<br>Describes |
| 1 (Intermediate) | Gets into, through and out of survival situations simply<br>Asks questions<br>Answers questions<br>Creates |
| 0+ (Novice High) | Communicates with memorized material |
| 0 (0, Novice Low, Novice Mid) | Has no functional ability |

OLPA Manual, p. 6

## CONTEXT/CONTENT

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | All nontechnical situations | | |
| (Superior) | Any conversation within the range of personal or professional experiences | | |
| | All topics normally pertinent to professional needs and social of a general nature | | |
| 3 | Expression and defense of opinions about current events and similar topics | | |
| (Superior) | Most formal and informal conversations | | |
| | Practical, social, professional and abstract topics | | |
| | Particular interests and special fields of competence | | |
| 2 | Recreational activities | | |
| (Advanced) | Limited work requirements | | |
| | Most social situations including introductions | | |
| | Concrete topics such as own background, family and interests, work, travel and current events | | |
| 1 | Simple question-and-answer situations | | |
| (Intermediate) | Familiar topics within scope of very limited language experience | | |
| | Routine travel needs | | |
| | Minimum courtesy requirements | | |
| | Everyday survival topics | | |
| 0+ | Basic objects | Family members | Months |
| (Novice High) | Colors | Weather | Day's date |
| | Clothing | Weekdays | Time |
| 0 | | | |
| (Novice Low, Novice Mid) | Some of the 0+ subject areas (above) | | |

OLPA Manual, p. 7

## ACCURACY

| | |
|---|---|
| 4 (Superior) | Only occasional unpatterned errors<br>Nearly perfect grammar<br>Errors of grammar quite rare |
| 3 (Superior) | Occasional errors in low-frequency structures<br>Occasional errors in the most complex frequent structures<br>Only sporadic errors in basic structures<br>Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker<br>Control of grammar good |
| 2 (Advanced) | Joining sentences in limited discourse<br>Good control of morphology of the language (in inflected languages) and of the most frequently used syntactic structures<br>Elementary constructions usually handled quite accurately, but does not have a thorough or confident control of grammar<br>Some miscommunication<br>Understandable to a native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners |
| 1 (Intermediate) | Normally errors made even in constructions which are quite simple and common<br>Errors in pronunciation and grammar frequent<br>Intelligible to a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners |
| 0 (Novice) | No functional ability (some intelligibility expected) |

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## Student Characterization

### The Novice level speaker

(with no learned material)
--is unable to communicate
--has no functional ability

(with some learned material)
--can react rather than interact
--can communicate minimally

### The Intermediate level speaker

--begins to create with language and to interact

--can ask and answer questions on familiar topics

--can get into, through, and out of a simple survival situation

### The Advanced level speaker

--can perform at the Superior level sometimes, but not consistently

--can narrate and describe in past, present, and future time

--can get into through, and out of a survival situation with a complication

### The Superior level speaker

--can support opinions, hypothesize, and talk about abstract topics

--can get into, through, and out of an unfamiliar situation

An example provided by Higgs and Clifford (1982) also illustrates the characterizations of the various levels.

> The following hypothetical examples, based on the performance of State Department visa officers, will serve to demonstrate the various proficiency levels in performing the rather elementary task of passing on some factual information to a visa applicant:
>
> | Level | Visa Officer's reply to applicant |
> |---|---|
> | 5 | Under U.S. statutes, your affiliation with the Communist Party renders you ineligible for a regular tourist visa. There exist, however, waiver procedures which may be invoked. These are the steps that you should initiate . . . . |
> | 4 | According to U.S. lawss your affiliation wiz ze Communist Party makes you uneligible for a regular tourist visa. You may, however, request a waiver. Zis iss what you must do . . . . |
> | 3 | Zee laaw zayz zat mambears of zee Communistic Partee caanoht bee geeven a regoolair tooreest veesaa. Owehvair, egzeptions are zohmtaymes dunn. You must do zees . . . . |
> | 2 | You cannot legulally get toolist visa. It is not light, because berong to Communistic Palty. But you can ask for a special permission. You to do this . . . . |
> | 1 | You commyunist. No gyet vyisa. Got tryy agyain. Take thyis. Fyill in, plyeez. |

These examples have been purposely contrived to demonstrate to Americans having limited experience with foreign languages what they themselves might sound like to a foreigner when attempting to communicate in the foreign language. The visa officer in each example was at least partially successful in communicating the fact that the applicant had to reapply using other procedures, but it should also be obvious that the total information communicated impressions about the speaker's

intelligence and social status. As the officer's proficiency decreased, increasing demands were put upon the applicant to interpret the message. Under these circumstances the officer cannot depend on a sympathetic listener for moral and linguistic support. (Higgs & Clifford, 1982, pp. 64-65)

## III. INTERVIEWING

The oral interview responds to the need to focus evaluation of a student's oral language proficiency on how well the student can be predicted to function in life situations (Brown, 1985). It is a proficiency test, not a progress test or achievement test. In the oral interview, each question has a specific linguistic and contextual purpose although the questions appear to be spontaneous and conversational. The interviewer knows the characteristics of each level on the proficiency hierarchy and seeks to find the student's level of linguistic breakdown, the level at which the student can no longer maintain linguistically accurate and culturally appropriate performance (Buck & Hiple, 1984). This is accomplished, however, within a congenial, comfortable atmosphere. To summarize, the oral language proficiency assessment interview is a seemingly informal conversation that in reality constitutes a highly structured and hierarchical exercise in establishing a level of sustained linguistic functioning ability.

OLPA Manual, p. 9

Interview techniques and procedures

The oral interview has four phases (Buck & Hiple, 1984):

1. Warm-up

The student is put at ease and the conversation is begun with social amenities such as "Hello. How are you?" The interviewer must determine after the initial responses how to proceed with the second phase. This phase usually helps establish a floor or baseline of oral language proficiency.

2. Level check

During the warm-up phase the interviewer senses the level which he or she believes represents the student's proficiency. During the level check questions are asked that validate or correct the interviewer's initial impression and that check the student's linguistic strengths.

3. Probes

During this phase the interviewer uses probes to check the student's ability to speak at the next higher level and to discover where linguistic breakdown may occur. Probes provide a way to seek a ceiling of oral language proficiency, the highest sustained level at which a student speaks, and discover the student's linguistic weaknesses.

4. Wind-down

During this phase the interviewer returns to more familiar structures and topics in an effort to end the interview with a feeling of success for the student.

The purpose of the interview is to find the ceiling, the highest sustained level at which the student can maintain the speech sample during the interview. During an interview, however, a student's performance usually varies and includes areas of linguistic strengths and weaknesses. There are times when the student may go beyond the sustained level and reach a peak level, defined as the uppermost level at which a student performs on an isolated topic during the interview (ETS OP Testing Manual, p. 15). Probes are used during these times to determine whether the speaker has reached only a peak level or whether it is indeed the speaker's sustained level or ceiling. It is important to note that one strength or one weakness will never determine a rating. One error counts nothing. A single error will not eliminate a student from qualifying for a higher level, but a pattern of weaknesses or errors will; hence, it is important to probe with higher level questions or speech elicitations. It is also important to keep in mind that

> each individual possesses a variety of language skills, and competence and performance will vary depending on the context or setting of language use, the interactants, their relationships and relative statuses, the domain of the communicative intent, and the topic. (Willig, 1985, p. 301)

In order to facilitate the interview process, it is helpful to note the importance of three techniques, (1) questioning, (2) role playing, and (3) the use of props.

During the interview many types of questions are used as well as prepared role play situations as level checks or probes. Role plays range from basic survival situations, to complicated situations, to abstract linguistic tasks (Buck & Hiple, 1984).

## Question Types and Role Plays

The following question types can be used in administering oral language proficiency interviews. They are taken and adapted from Handbook on Question Types and Their Use in LS Oral Proficiency Tests (Preliminary Version) by Pardee Lowe, Jr.; Language School: May 1976. (Revised 1981).

1. YES/NO QUESTIONS

   Example: "Do you live in Miami?"

   Description: The Yes/No Question can be answered by one word, yes or no; or by yes/no, followed by a repetition of the words in the question or more extensive information.

1.A. REGULAR STATEMENTS WITH QUESTION INTONATION

   Example: "You went to the cafeteria." "Your brother is sick?"

   Description: A regular statement is made using regular word order and without any question words, but the whole statement is spoken with question intonation.

2. CHOICE QUESTIONS

   Example: "How did you come to school this morning, by bus or by car?"

   Description: A Choice Question provides within the question itself at least two possible answers.

3. POLITE REQUESTS

   Example: "Please stand up." "Would you describe this room please?"

   Description: The Polite Request is a command or question phrased in a polite, friendly way. A Polite Request may involve certain politeness adverbs or particles or even subjunctive forms, depending on the language. Requests should always be presented in a polite, friendly manner to avoid any feeling on the part of the candidate that he is being forced to do something.

QUESTION TYPES (con't.)

4. INFORMATION QUESTIONS

Examples: "Who was with you?" "Whom/Who did you see?" "What did you expect?" "When were you there?" "Why did he come?" "How did he get here?" -- When eliciting fact, not opinion.

Description: The Information Question elicits a speech sample containing facts rather than opinion. It begins with a question word and cannot be answered with a simple yes or no.

4.A. INFORMATION QUESTIONS WITH PROPS

| Examples of Props and Items to be Elicited | Possible Props |
|---|---|
| Weather | Window with outside view |
| Giving dates (from easy to difficult) | Calendar |
| Following directions | Map |
| Identifying Objects | Set of pictures or objects in testing room |
| Telling what candidate/others have on | Candidate or Tester(s) |
| Identifying actions | Set of pictures |

Description: Polite Requests and Information Questions are combined to ask the candidate to produce simple sentences or vocabulary with the aid of a prop (some concrete object, such as a picture, calendar, etc.).

5. FAMILIAR SITUATIONS

Example: "Order a hamburger and french fries."

Description: The Familiar Situation consists of a situation in which the student role-plays to get basic necessities of life. The purpose of the situation or role-play is to pin down aspects of the student's language that have not evolved in the conversation format. Situations, or role-plays, are a valuable component of oral interviews at all levels, but particularly at the lower end of the rating scale. An interviewer should have several situations for each level on hand for each interview and should always set

QUESTION TYPES (cont.)

the stage for the role-play. For students who read, it is often helpful to give them an index card with a description of a role-play situation so that they will more fully understand the instructions. The interviewer also plays a role in the situation. (Note: There are no situations/role-plays, however, for the Novice level but modified Intermediate level situations may be effective with some students.)

5A. FAMILIAR SITUATIONS WITH A COMPLICATION (Higher language levels)

Example: "You are in the cafeteria. You have eaten most of your lunch when you discover a bug on your lettuce. You feel ill. Call your teacher and tell her/him about the problem."

Description: The Familiar Situation with a Complication consists of a script for role-play in which an unforeseen difficulty occurs in an encounter concerned with survival needs.

6. STUDENT INTERVIEWS INTERVIEWER

Example: "I've been asking you questions; now I'd like for you to ask me some questions."

Description: The student asks questions of the interviewer to test student's facility with question structures.

7. REPHRASABLE QUESTIONS

Example: "Please elucidate the functions of a bicameral legislature." "Please explain how the two houses of Congress make our laws."

Description: A Rephrasable Question is a question that allows the interviewer to probe at a higher level, then rephrase at a lower level.

8. HYPOTHETICAL QUESTIONS (Higher language levels)

Example: "If you had a million dollars, what would you do?"

QUESTION TYPES (cont.)

Description: The Hypothetical Question sets the stage for a discussion of the possible, either now, in the future, or in the past. In some languages, like English, there is a large number of variations which may be used in the sentence frame.

Examples of Frames:
"If you had the ability, what would you like to be?"
"Had you been there, what would you have done differently?"
"Assume you have the opportunity of reshaping the city plan. How would you marry human with business needs?"
"Assuming . . . . "
"Let's assume . . . . "
"Let's pretend . . . . "
"Suppose . . . . "
"Supposing . . . . "
"Let's suppose . . . . "
"Granting . . . . "
"Granted . . . . "

9. UNFAMILIAR SITUATIONS

Example: "You are in charge of the sports equipment in your class. Explain to the other students the rules for using the equipment: sign-out sheet, return after use, care of the equipment."

Description: The Unfamiliar Situation contains the kernel of a situation with which a student might have to deal in everyday life. Unlike a Familiar Situation, the Unfamiliar Situation should contain elements likely to be unknown so that his/her ability to make his/her wants known, despite lack of exact vocabulary, can be adequately tested.

10. DESCRIPTIVE PRELUDES

Example: "You have heard that the school soccer team is doing poorly this year. What would you do if you were the coach?"

Description: The Descriptive Prelude is a series of questions or statements designed to introduce a new topic, test listening comprehension, and suggest a different level or style for the student's speech production.

QUESTION TYPES (cont.)

11. STUDENT-PROMPTED QUESTIONS

Example: "What is college like?"

Description: The Student Prompted Question is one to which the student leads the interviewer. It arises when the student is able to talk about or suggest an area of personal or professional interest, obviously knows something about it, and wants to discuss the topic further.

12. OPINION QUESTIONS

Fact versus Opinion Questions

In the presentation of Question Types, the majority of the Question Types listed so far have been Fact Questions. Fact Questions have two distinct limitations:

A. They may lead the interviewer to rate or factual rather than on linguistic content.

B. They may degenerate into an interrogation.

Example: Interviewer: "Do you like living here?"
Student: "Yes."
Interviewer: "Why?"

Description: At the higher levels, Opinion Questions are more useful because they encourage the student to give examples of more complicated linguistic structures in his/her answers. Opinion Questions are those which elicit SUPPORTED OPINION. Obviously, lower level speaker can say two-word phrases such as "I agree," "I don't believe it," etc. However, to support his/her opinion, "I do not agree because . . . ," may require the student to control more complex verb forms, to follow a sequence of tenses, or employ the correct word order. Because test time is precious, it is important to make the student talk as much as possible. This can often be accomplished by phrasing Opinion Questions provocatively to encourage the student to choose sides or express an opinion.

QUESTION TYPES (cont.)

12. (cont.)

Some English Examples of Verbs of Saying and Feeling

ASSERT: "Would you really assert that?"

BE AGAINST: "Why are you against that?" (colloquial)

BE FOR: "Why are you for that?" (colloquial)

BELIEVE: "Why do you believe that?"

CITE: "Can you cite your reasons for that (statement)?"

FEEL: "Why do you feel that that is so?"

"How do you feel that that helped?" (colloquial)

MAINTAIN: "Why do you maintain that he acted that way?"

SAY: "Why do you say that?"

"What do you say to that?" (colloquial)

THINK: "Why do you think that?"

"What do you think about that?" (colloquial)

VIEW: "How do you view that?"

## Props

The use of props is often essential in interviewing. A prop is a visual aid to use as an object of discussion. Props not only help reduce anxiety in the student, they also serve as valuable aids in communication and understanding, particularly with children and at the Novice level regardless of the age of the student. All classroom teachers are accustomed to using props or visual aids in eliciting language and thought in their students. During oral language proficiency interviews, props offer a comfortable vehicle and provide a topic of conversation when the interviewer question/student answer format is not possible or effective. Examples of props are clear and simple pictures of single, ordinary objects such as a picture of a red apple and simple scenes such as children playing with a ball. One technique that is helpful in interviewing is for the interviewer to have a ready supply of cards with pictures or photographs categorized according to the four levels, Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. Since such a card catalog is not available as part of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, this is one way classroom teachers may adapt existing curricular and instructional materials in order to use the Guidelines more effectively. The key to successful materials adaptation, however, is mastery of the ACTFL Generic Speaking Descriptions and other pertinent information that helps to separate the proficiency levels so that the level of the props used will correspond appropriately with each level

of proficiency. Props such as actual objects (a real apple) or puppets are also helpful. Again, the success of using props is dependent on how well the prop matches the oral language proficiency level of the student. Culturally biased questions and props are obviously not helpful and the interviewer can obtain more representative language samples when the student does, indeed, understand the significance of the prop or question.

Another technique is the use of "minimal encouragers," that is, the interviewer acknowledges the student's answers or comments but offers minimal encouragement and no personal elaboration of the student's statements. Even though the conversation is meant to be informal yet structured, the object is for the student to do the talking, not the interviewer. At times it is necessary for the interviewer to set up a role play situation or comment more extensively, but the general rule is to keep comments to a minimum. The interviewer's silence is also a good way to prompt the student to continue speaking. Examples of minimal encouragers are:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes. | No. | Sure. |
| Yeah. | Really? | Fine. |
| Yep. | Right. | That's interesting. |
| Uh huh. | Correct. | Great. |
| O.K. | I see. | Oh. |
| Of course. | | |

Interviewer bias and mistakes

As with any subjective appraisal of performance, there are many areas of potential bias that the interviewer must be aware of and guard against. For instance, a distinction is often made between students who have learned the target language in school settings and those who have learned it by living in the target language environment (ETS OP Testing Manual, p. 18). A student who has learned the language in school may be strong in grammar but weak in everyday vocabulary. On the other hand, a student who has learned by living in the target culture may know a great deal of vocabulary but use incorrect grammar. It is important in rating not to compare students' performance with other students at the same level but with the ACTFL Generic Descriptions for Speaking. When the interviewer is thoroughly familiar with the descriptions and their use in evaluating language samples, the potential for subjective bias in assessment is greatly reduced. Evaluating becomes a matter of seeking the facts embedded in the language sample that are specifically delineated in the Generic Descriptions. That is not to say that bias does not exist, but that when a judgment is made, the interviewer has made the determination based on the facts of the language sample. A parable by Pardee Lowe (ETS OP Testing Manual, p. 19) illustrates how standards can drift when ratings are based on factors other than the level descriptions.

## The Story of Ice Cream

In the land of Ice Cream there was once a law that stated that the designation "creamy ice cream" could be applied only to those batches of ice cream whose butterfat content was 30 percent or higher. Two ice cream testers were designated to check each batch so that the law could be applied uniformly.

One day, however, an ice cream manufacturer said that a batch he had produced, which the testers showed had 27 percent butterfat content, was in fact a true "creamy" ice cream. He said, "Taste it for yourselves!"

So a group of four managers plus the testers inspected the ice cream. One pointed out that it was "creamy" to touch. Another indicated that it had a "creamy look." Two said that it "tasted creamy." The two testers said that the butterfat content was 27 percent, which did not conform to the standard for the designation "creamy." One of the testers did admit that such a batch of ice cream might "taste creamy."

But by this time, the managers were feeling sorry for the ice cream manufacturer because he had tried so hard and had just been passed over for a promotion, and they declared that the batch of ice cream was indeed "creamy."

P.S. In subsequent years, the definition of "creamy" ice cream became so completely divorced from the butterfat content that the inhabitants of that land discovered one day that ice cream and ice milk were differentiated only by the packaging.

Two students can give very different performances and still be at the same level. The most extreme cases are those of the school and nonschool learners described above, but any two individuals will use the language at their disposal differently. Practically no speech sample will exactly match a level description in all respects. However, it is possible for two samples to be assigned the same rating if they show patterns of strength and weakness that fall within the boundaries of a given description.

The following potential interferences and biases provide a beginning point from which an interviewer's personal

attitude awareness inventory may be developed:

Interviewer's level of oral English language proficiency, dialect, mannerisms, value orientations, and cultural biases.

Checklists, formats, suggestions

It is often helpful to have at hand a basic checklist to insure that all details are covered and accounted for prior to a more formal interview. The following pages include information that is useful toward this end and also include suggestions and practical hints for interviewing.

OLPA Manual, p. 10

## Interview Checklist

| | | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| Novice level | Tried to have conversation? | ___ | ___ |
| | Covered Novice Subject areas: | | |
| | Basic Objects | ___ | ___ |
| | Body parts | ___ | ___ |
| | Colors | ___ | ___ |
| | Clothing | ___ | ___ |
| | Day's Date | ___ | ___ |
| | Family members | ___ | ___ |
| | Foods | ___ | ___ |
| | Months | ___ | ___ |
| | Numbers | ___ | ___ |
| | Time | ___ | ___ |
| | Weather | ___ | ___ |
| | Weekdays | ___ | ___ |
| | Year | ___ | ___ |

Comments:

OLPA Manual, p. 11

## Interview Checklist

| | | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inter-mediate level | Tried to have conversation? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for minimum courtesy requirements? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked that student can handle simple situations of daily life? | ___ | ___ |
| | Had student ask you questions? | ___ | ___ |
| | Probed for narration in past and future time? | ___ | ___ |
| | Tried props when conversation failed? | ___ | ___ |

Comments:

OLPA Manual, p. 12

## Interview Checklist

| | | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| Advanced level | Checked for ability to handle routine social demands? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked autobiographical information? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked current events? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked basic structures? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked more complex structures? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for description? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for narration, particularly in past and future? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for joining sentences in connected discourse? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for situations with a complication? | ___ | ___ |
| | Probed unknown topic or situation? | ___ | ___ |
| | Probed for supported opinion? | ___ | ___ |

Comments:

OLPA Manual, p. 13

## Interview Checklist

| | | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| Superior level | Checked both everyday and abstract subject matter? | ___ | ___ |
| | Placed student in unfamiliar situations and topics? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked control of grammar? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for supported opinion? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for ability to hypothesize? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for detailed description and narration? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for use of low-frequency structures? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for broad vocabulary? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for use of complex structures? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for specialized vocabulary? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for ability to tailor speech to audience? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for high level colloquialisms? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for cultural references? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for ability to converse freely in own fields? | ___ | ___ |
| | Checked for ability to sound and speak like an ENS? | ___ | ___ |

Comments:

OLPA Manual, p. 14

Source: Adapted from ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual, 1982, Appendix IV, p. 12

## FORMAT FOR INTERVIEWING

I. BEFORE THE TEST:

A. Read the ACTFL Generic Descriptions for Speaking (the proficiency definitions) before the interview.

B. Prepare specific questions for various levels.

II. INTERVIEW:

A. WARM-UP: Never skip this phase. Be sure the student gets into the language as comfortably as possible.

B. LEVEL CHECK: Find level. Test for accuracy of grammar and breadth of vocabulary of several areas of interest.

C. PROBES: Be sure to push student to the uppermost level of ability in the language. This should happen at least three or four times.

D. WIND-DOWN: Drop to a slightly lower level. Student should end interview with feeling of accomplishment.

III. AFTER THE TEST:

A. Reread the ACTFL Generic Descriptions for Speaking (the proficiency definitions).

B. Note problems with this particular interview.

C. Note any useful areas of interest, questions, or techniques for future use.

IV. RATING:

A. Rate as soon as possible after the interview even if recorded.

B. Do not discuss performance in the student's presence.

C. Go through student's overall performance to yourself.

D. Refer to checklists and manual to determine rating.

Suggestions for Interviewing Children (Adapted from Erickson, pp. 285-288, in Erickson & Omark, Eds., 1981).

The following discussion provides general information and specific suggestions for interviewing children for the purpose of obtaining a sample of oral language. It is important to have an informal atmosphere even when conducting specific probes into a child's language structure or language function.

There are several constraints inherent in an interview situation which may limit a child's verbal output. A child's interactions with adults are less free than those with peers or persons familiar to the child. Differences in language use and complexity also occur. One reason for the differences is the adult's tendency to play a role of questioner which imposes restraints on conversational potentials. Another reason relates to perceived status and language level differences between the speakers. Awareness of these problems and limitations should help an interviewer modify behavior and maximize the potential for obtaining information from a verbal interaction with a child. The establishment of rapport is paramount for obtaining a language sample that represents a child's optimal output.

In order to maximize the potential for establishing rapport with a child, an interviewer must be aware of personal perceptions of conversational roles and attitudes toward children. An interview with a child should be couched in three basic premises:

1. It is important to view the child as a person who has something worthwhile to say and the potential for sharing it with an interested listener.
2. The child deserves the same conversational rights as an adult--not answering, answering with incomplete utterances or ellipses, directing the conversation, interrupting, and so forth.
3. If the interview is not going well, it is the interviewer's responsibility and not the child's.

It may be that the interviewer is talking <u>at</u> rather than <u>with</u> the child or that he or she is interrogating rather than conversing. One of the basic problems may be that the interviewer does not present verbal and nonverbal behavior that indicates listening, including interest in what the child says.

<u>Additional Suggestions</u>

1. Use materials suitable to the age or level of functioning of the child. For example, for preschoolers, actual toys usually produce more speech than pictures of toys. Toys that have moving parts, as well as at least one broken toy, are good stimulus materials. In general, books, toys, and brightly colored pictures are especially useful for kindergarten and elementary school children.
2. Consider the physical characteristics of the situation. It should lend itself to a naturalistic interaction rather than a structured situation such as two interactors seated formally at a table.

3. Present the child with a few items and allow for freedom of selection. When the child has made a choice, watch what the child does with it and use the activity as a basis for conversation. If the child does not talk, make general statements such as "I wonder what's happening," "What does it make you think of?", "I'm interested in your story about the picture." Avoid questions such as "Do you want to (or can you) tell me about that picture?" for which the child has the right to answer "No."
4. If statements or questions produce no response to stimulus items, demonstrate what you require of the child. For example, take a toy yourself and play with it, telling about what you are doing and personalize your account using an imaginary situation.
5. When the child chooses a picture and does not respond to questions, demonstrate how to talk about a picture. If you have any indication of the child's language comprehension, suit your input to a level that you are confident the child can follow, keeping in mind that if it is too simplistic you will be providing a model of what you expect from the child.
6. Vary the situation. Try to obtain a sample with the child playing a game such as keeping house, then building something, then playing with toys, etc.
7. Interview indoors and outdoors or at the child's home if possible.
8. Record what you say.

9. It is important to remember that when in doubt about the level at which a student should be rated, rate conservatively. Choose the lower level, particularly at major thresholds.
10. Make an effort to provide smooth transitions between areas of conversation.
11. Converse with the child as the child is interacting with peers during play time or a classroom activity that lends itself to conversation.
12. Use a normal conversational tone and avoid the sing-song presentation of memorized questions that often characterizes teacher talk.
13. Avoid colloquialisms until a proficiency level has been tentatively reached. Informal conversations lead to use of idioms that may be familiar to the interviewer but not to a LEP student.
14. Allow time for the student to respond.
15. Speak at a normal rate of speed, not too fast, not too slowly.
16. Remember that questions should elicit language, not necessarily information.
17. Allow time for the warm-up. Often students need a few minutes to settle into the interview format. The interviewer should try to create an atmosphere in which the student feels at ease and unstressed.

18. Do not correct the student during the interview even when the student reverts to words in the native language. Rephrase question or allow student to circumlocute.
19. Do not give the student a word or phrase. Ask the student to say it or describe it in another way. Or say, "That's O.K., let's go on to something else."
20. Do not take notes during the interview. One of the most important caveats regarding oral language proficiency assessment interviewing described here is that the interviewer must conduct the interview as a conversation and not take notes or include other distractions such as referring to the guidelines.
21. Remember that experience enhances efficiency and expertise.
22. If it is a formal interview, explain the purpose of interview to student. If informal, it is not always necessary. Inform students generally of the proficiency focus as class procedure. The goal is proficiency which comes from motivation, practice, and learning as the way to become proficient, not memorizing for discrete-point testing.
23. A good mid is a good mid, not a high.
24. Pauses are ratable.
25. Be sure questions are open-ended and not discrete-point.
26. Allow time for an ample response.
27. Be purposeful and not content-based (We're testing language and not knowledge of a subject).

28. Be conversational and be sure to link the questions together.
29. Keep in mind that the conversational style lends itself to colloquialisms, abbreviated speech, and informal pronunciations that novice level students may not understand.
30. Examine your own language strengths and weaknesses. Do you revert to informal speech patterns when outside of the teacher mode yet use formal language when teaching?

Problems to Avoid

1. Avoid asking very specific questions that elicit yes/no answers or questions typically resulting in one word responses (e.g., "What's that?" ("A horse"); "What is it doing?" ("Running"); "What do you see?" ("A fork"); "Do you have one of those?" ("Yes/No")).
2. Avoid asking the child to tell a very familiar story that is known by heart or involves a lot of repetition of sentences (e.g., Goldilocks and the Three Bears).
3. Recognize the limitations of your props. For example, a doll house limits the child to furniture vocabulary, and action pictures can limit the child to the present progressive tense.
4. Modify your statements so they do not lock the response set. For example, asking "What is he doing" will probably elicit gerund form responses; questioning may only give you samples of declaratives and not allow the child to demonstrate the use of interrogatives;

conversation related to materials present may never allow an opportunity for the child to generate past tense markers; talking about single items limits the potential use of plural markers.

5. Do not present only boy-like or girl-like toys or pictures, but allow for choice in that children will vary in their interest and background of experience.
6. Do not be concerned by silences to the point of filling in the gap with your own verbal output. The focus is on obtaining a language sample of the child rather than of the interviewer.

## IV. STUDENT VARIABLES

Although the ACTFL/ETS interview technique is an excellent and established test of oral proficiency, there remains the need to modify it further for application in elementary, high school, and even college settings (Frink, 1982). Elementary classroom teachers in bilingual and ESL programs in particular must consider many variables in evaluating their students' oral language proficiency. These variables may be categorized into three areas:

1. students' ages and developmental stages,
2. cultural and environmental factors, and
3. students' personal and affective characteristics.

### Ages and developmental stages

For many years children's abilities have been measured and cross-cultural research carried out using Piagetian techniques, particularly the conservation-of-quantity experiment (Ashton, 1975). The experiment evaluates a child's ability to judge that the amount of liquid in a short, wide beaker remains the same when the liquid is poured into a tall, thin beaker. Children from many cultures have been subjects for this experiment. Their cognitive structures have been compared and findings have revealed similarities and differences among children of different cultures.

A brief discussion of Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development is helpful here. Piaget posited a hierarchical theory that divides intellectual development into four major periods:

1. The sensorimotor stage, generally lasting from birth to two years and characterized by learning through active manipulation of the environment.

2. The preoperational stage, lasting from ages two to seven and marked by the onset of symbolic thought.

3. The concrete operations stage, lasting from ages seven to eleven, during which the child masters the concepts of identity, reversibility, and compensation.

4. The formal operations stage, which is characterized by the attainment of a high degree of abstract thinking (Ashton, 1975).

The relevance for oral language proficiency assessment in ESL and bilingual classrooms is that interpretation of Piagetian theory has made distinct value judgments in favor of Western performance patterns. Often children have been diagnosed as cognitively deficient according to standardized measurements of middle-class, white American students. What is assumed as a cognitive deficiency may in reality be attributed to other causes, such as culturally-based beliefs. For instance an eight-year-old middle-class white child growing up in the United States may respond to the water and beaker experiment by noting the equality of liquid in both beakers, while a youngster in Senegal, West Africa, may insist that the water has changed and increased in quantity when poured into the tall, thin beaker. Children of pottery-making families in Jalisco, Mexico, perform better on the conservation-of-quantity experiment than their peers from non-

pottery-making families. Research has also indicated that cultural beliefs may have a negative effect on cognitive development. Kohlberg (1968) found that among the Atayal, a Malaysian aboriginal group in Taiwan, conservation of a substance was acquired at the usual age of about seven or eight but then partially lost at ages eleven to fifteen, apparently due to conflict with adult beliefs about magic. These findings raise important issues concerning the validity of Piaget's theory, the nature of cultural and subcultural differences, and the diagnosis of language proficiency in ESL and bilingual children based on cognitive development theory.

The point is made that cross-cultural research suggests a developmental lag for the acquisition of conservation in non-Western, non-industrialized cultures. What is not clear, however, is whether the lag may be due to the use of culturally inappropriate assessment of children's ability which would naturally be accompanied by lack of motivation or whether the lag may be due to real cognitive differences between cultures. The important point to remember is that a student's age and developmental stage, cultural background and knowledge coupled with the impact of the student's immediate environment may, indeed, be reflected in that student's oral language proficiency skills.

Cultural and environmental factors

The conditions under which language is learned are largely culturally determined (Mattes & Omark, 1984). Forms of social interaction vary from culture to culture and

differences exist in the ways language is used for various purposes. Values, mores, and ways to interpret everyday experiences also vary. The cultural and environmental factors that make up a child's world have an impact on the child's capabilities to communicate and are important to consider in assessing oral language proficiency.

Culture is defined as "the acquired patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that make life meaningful for a particular group of human beings" (Hallman, 1983). As we interact with others in our everyday lives we use our cultural knowledge as a guide for interpreting experiences. Much of everyday life is a series of unanticipated social occasions and although our culture does not provide a detailed map for all occasions, it does provide principles for interpreting them.

Several questions about the child's culture or environment may be important to consider (Erickson & Omark, Eds., 1981):

1. Why have members of the cultural group left their homeland?
2. Why have members of the cultural group settled in the local community?
3. To what extent is poverty a factor in the cultural group?
4. What is the typical family size?
5. What roles are assigned to individual family members?

6. What cultural customs, values, and beliefs are relevant to understanding children's behavior?
7. What are the social functions and leisure activities in which members of the cultural group participate?
8. How do members of the cultural group view the role and importance of education?
9. What language(s) do the parents speak to each other?
10. What language(s) do the parents speak to the child?
11. What language(s) do the children use with each other?
12. What language does the referred child prefer to use when playing with friends?
13. Who takes care of the child after school? What language is used?
14. Who lives in the home (parents, grandparents, etc.)?
15. How much time does each parent have to interact with the child?
16. With whom does the child play when at home?
17. What television programs are seen in each language?
18. Are stories read to the child? In what language is the reading material written?
19. What language is used in church services, if attended?
20. What does the child do after school and on weekends?
21. What responsibilities does the child have in the home?
22. How is the child expected to act toward parents, teachers, and other adults?

23. In what cultural activities does the family participate?
24. How do the parents expect adults to act toward the child?
25. Are there any specific prohibitions in the everyday interactions between adults and children, for example, do not look adults in the eye when talking to them, do not pat children on the top of the head, do not ask children questions?
26. How long has the family been in this country?
27. How long has the family been in the local community?
28. How much contact does the family have with the homeland? What kind of contact?
29. Are the parents employed? If so, in what line of work?
30. What are the parents' views on education for their child?

Personal and affective characteristics

Regardless of age and developmental stage, cultural background and environmental circumstances, children's survival and development depend on their capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to them (Kegan, 1982). For many children this is an inborn characteristic, for others it is a skill that must be developed and cultivated. In either case, it is important to consider qualities and characteristics about a child in order to evaluate the child's

oral language proficiency in the most effective and efficient way.

In recent years, the study of children's motivation to achieve has attracted the attention of researchers from diverse areas. The subject has been discussed in terms such as locus of control, learned helplessness, values orientations, attribution theory, and positive and negative affect. Another research direction has been self efficacy, a concept that involves individuals' beliefs and judgments about their capabilities to carry out tasks (Bandura, 1977). Expectations of people of their potential for success are influenced by their own past experiences and efforts and determine whether they will initiate coping behavior, expend and sustain effort, and overcome obstacles. An example from children's literature better illustrates this theory: The Little Engine that Could. Children who exemplify highly efficacious behavior are the classic models of success, while children with a lower sense of self efficacy often experience lack of success. These behaviors in both cases may be reinforced.

Awareness of the importance of self efficacy attitudes is especially important regarding teaching limited English proficient children and evaluating their oral language proficiency skills. Individuals can be trained to encourage the development of their own personal efficacy attitudes, some of which involve characteristics such as persistence in the face of failure, optimism, self discipline, goal setting, and

high self esteem. Nowhere are these characteristics more important than in a child's speaking ability where anxiety and fear of failure often counterbalance many positive factors.

Information about these student variables, in addition to those mentioned previously, will contribute to a more valid rating of oral language proficiency. Other variables are grade, sex, religious preference, socioeconomic status, first language, other languages, Lau category, learning style, personality type, interests, hobbies, past times, family structure, birth order, and nonverbal habits such as gestures and nervousness.

In summary, information for a total student profile forms the final complement of language hierarchy factors which may be used as an overall guide for assessing students' oral language proficiency skills. While it is impossible to be familiar with all of the variables that affect a student's ability and motivation to speak, the more information teachers have and know about their students, the better the chances are not only for obtaining ratable language samples, but also for establishing and maintaining solid, positive rapport with their students.

# Appendix 1

## The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

# ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES

The 1986 proficiency guidelines represent a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Each description is a representative, not an exhaustive, sample of a particular range of ability, and each level subsumes all previous levels, moving from simple to complex in an "all-before-and-more" fashion.

Because these guidelines identify stages of proficiency, as opposed to achievement, they are not intended to measure what an individual has achieved through specific classroom instruction but rather to allow assessment of what an individual can and cannot do, regardless of where, when, or how the language has been learned or acquired; thus, the words "learned" and "acquired" are used in the broadest sense. These guidelines are not based on a particular linguistic theory or pedagogical method, since the guidelines are proficiency-based, as opposed to achievement-based, and are intended to be used for global assessment.

The 1986 guidelines should not be considered the definitive version, since the construction and utilization of language proficiency guidelines is a dynamic, interactive process. The academic sector, like the government sector, will continue to refine and update the criteria periodically to reflect the needs of the users and the advances of the profession. In this vein, ACTFL owes a continuing debt to the creators of the 1982 provisional proficiency guidelines and, of course, to the members of the Interagency Language Roundtable Testing Committee, the creators of the government's Language Skill Level Descriptions.

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## Generic Descriptions–Speaking

**Novice** — The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material.

Novice-Low — Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases. Essentially no functional communicative ability.

Novice-Mid — Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quality is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple, elementary needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words. Speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty.

Novice-High — Able to satisfy partially the requirements of basic communicative exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through simple recombinations of their elements. Can ask questions or make statements involving learned material. Shows signs of spontaneity although this falls short of real autonomy of expression. Speech continues to consist of learned utterances rather than of personalized, situationally adapted ones. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common kinship terms. Pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. Errors are frequent and, in spite of repetition, some Novice-High speakers will have difficulty being understood even by sympathetic interlocutors.

**Intermediate** — The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode;
—initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and
—ask and answer questions.

Intermediate-Low — Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-Mid — Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-High — Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. Limited vocabulary still necessitates hesitation and may bring about slightly unexpected circumlocution. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally by understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.

**Advanced** — The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—converse in a clearly participatory fashion;
—initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events;
—satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and
—narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

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| Advanced | Able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced-level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing and circumlocution. Differentiated vocabulary and intonation are effectively used to communicate fine shades of meaning. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate. |
| **Superior** | The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:<br>—participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and<br>—support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies. |
| Superior | Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Can discuss special fields of competence and interest with ease. Can support opinions and hypothesize, but may not be able to tailor language to audience or discuss in depth highly abstract or unfamiliar topics. Usually the Superior level speaker is only partially familiar with regional or other dialectical variants. The Superior level speaker commands a wide variety of interactive strategies and shows good awareness of discourse strategies. The latter involves the ability to distinguish main ideas from supporting information through syntactic, lexical and suprasegmental features (pitch, stress, intonation). Sporadic errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures and some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal writing, but no patterns of error are evident. Errors do not disturb the native speaker or interfere with communication. |

## Generic Descriptions–Listening

These guidelines assume that all listening tasks take place in an authentic environment at a normal rate of speech using standard or near-standard norms.

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| Novice-Low | Understanding is limited to occasional isolated words, such as cognates, borrowed words, and high-frequency social conventions. Essentially no ability to comprehend even short utterances. |
| Novice-Mid | Able to understand some short, learned utterances, particularly where context strongly supports understanding and speech is clearly audible. Comprehends some words and phrases from simple questions, statements, high-frequency commands and courtesy formulae about topics that refer to basic personal information or the immediate physical setting. The listener requires long pauses for assimilation and periodically requests repetition and/or a slower rate of speech. |
| Novice-High | Able to understand short, learned utterances and some sentence-length utterances, particularly where context strongly supports understanding and speech is clearly audible. Comprehends words and phrases from simple questions, statements, high-frequency commands and courtesy formulae. May require repetition, rephrasing and/or a slowed rate of speech for comprehension. |
| Intermediate-Low | Able to understand sentence-length utterances which consist of recombinations of learned elements in a limited number of content areas, particularly if strongly supported by the situational context. Content refers to basic personal background and needs, social conventions and routine tasks, such as getting meals and receiving simple instructions and directions. Listening tasks pertain primarily to spontaneous face-to-face conversations. Understanding is often uneven; repetition and rewording may be necessary. Misunderstandings in both main ideas and details arise frequently. |

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| Intermediate-Mid | Able to understand sentence-length utterances which consist of recombinations of learned utterances on a variety of topics. Content continues to refer primarily to basic personal background and needs, social conventions and somewhat more complex tasks, such as lodging, transportation, and shopping. Additional content areas include some personal interests and activities, and a greater diversity of instructions and directions. Listening tasks not only pertain to spontaneous face-to-face conversations but also to short routine telephone conversations and some deliberate speech, such as simple announcements and reports over the media. Understanding continues to be uneven. |
| Intermediate-High | Able to sustain understanding over longer stretches of connected discourse on a number of topics pertaining to different times and places; however, understanding is inconsistent due to failure to grasp main ideas and/or details. Thus, while topics do not differ significantly from those of an Advanced level listener, comprehension is less in quantity and poorer in quality. |
| Advanced | Able to understand main ideas and most details of connected discourse on a variety of topics beyond the immediacy of the situation. Comprehension may be uneven due to a variety of linguistic and extralinguistic factors, among which topic familiarity is very prominent. These texts frequently involve description and narration in different time frames or aspects, such as present, nonpast, habitual, or imperfective. Texts may include interviews, short lectures on familiar topics, and news items and reports primarily dealing with factual information. Listener is aware of cohesive devices but may not be able to use them to follow the sequence of thought in an oral text. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to understand the main ideas of most speech in a standard dialect; however, the listener may not be able to sustain comprehension in extended discourse which is propositionally and linguistically complex. Listener shows an emerging awareness of culturally implied meanings beyond the surface meanings of the text but may fail to grasp sociocultural nuances of the message. |
| Superior | Able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization. Can follow the essentials of extended discourse which is propositionally and linguistically complex, as in academic/professional settings, in lectures, speeches, and reports. Listener shows some appreciation of aesthetic norms of target language, of idioms, colloquialisms, and register shifting. Able to make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language. Understanding is aided by an awareness of the underlying organizational structure of the oral text and includes sensitivity for its social and cultural references and its affective overtones. Rarely misunderstands but may not understand excessively rapid, highly colloquial speech or speech that has strong cultural references. |
| Distinguished | Able to understand all forms and styles of speech pertinent to personal, social and professional needs tailored to different audiences. Shows strong sensitivity to social and cultural references and aesthetic norms by processing language from within the cultural framework. Texts include theater plays, screen productions, editorials, symposia, academic debates, public policy statements, literary readings, and most jokes and puns. May have difficulty with some dialects and slang. |

## Generic Descriptions–Reading

These guidelines assume all reading texts to be authentic and legible.

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| Novice-Low | Able occasionally to identify isolated words and/or major phrases when strongly supported by context. |
| Novice-Mid | Able to recognize the symbols of an alphabetic and/or syllabic writing system and/or a limited number of characters in a system that uses characters. The reader can identify an increasing number of highly contextualized words and/or phrases including cognates and borrowed words, where appropriate. Material understood rarely exceeds a single phrase at a time, and rereading may be required. |
| Novice-High | Has sufficient control of the writing system to interpret written language in areas of practical need. Where vocabulary has been learned, can read for instructional and directional purposes standardized messages, phrases or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps, and signs. At times, but not on a consistent basis, the Novice-High level reader may be able to derive meaning from material at a slightly higher level where context and/or extralinguistic background knowledge are supportive. |

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| Intermediate-Low | Able to understand main ideas and/or some facts from the simplest connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs. Such texts are linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure, for example chronological sequencing. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make only minimal suppositions or to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples include messages with social purposes or information for the widest possible audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions dealing with public life. Some misunderstandings will occur. |
| Intermediate-Mid | Able to read consistently with increased understanding simple connected texts dealing with a variety of basic and social needs. Such texts are still linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make minimal suppositions and to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples may include short, straightforward descriptions of persons, places, and things written for a wide audience. |
| Intermediate—High | Able to read consistently with full understanding simple connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs about which the reader has personal interest and/or knowledge. Can get some main ideas and information from texts at the next higher level featuring description and narration. Structural complexity may interfere with comprehension; for example, basic grammatical relations may be misinterpreted and temporal references may rely primarily on lexical items. Has some difficulty with the cohesive factors in discourse, such as matching pronouns with referents. While texts do not differ significantly from those at the Advanced level, comprehension is less consistent. May have to read material several times for understanding. |
| Advanced | Able to read somewhat longer prose of several paragraphs in length, particularly if presented with a clear underlying structure. The prose is predominantly in familar sentence patterns. Reader gets the main ideas and facts and misses some details. Comprehension derives not only from situational and subject matter knowledge but from increasing control of the language. Texts at this level include descriptions and narrations such as simple short stories, news items, bibliographical information, social notices, personal correspondence, routinized business letters and simple technical material written for the general reader. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to follow essential points of written discourse at the Superior level in areas of special interest or knowledge. Able to understand parts of texts which are conceptually abstract and linguistically complex, and/or texts which treat unfamiliar topics and situations, as well as some texts which involve aspects of target-language culture. Able to comprehend the facts to make appropriate inferences. An emerging awareness of the aesthetic properties of language and of its literary styles permits comprehension of a wider variety of texts, including literary. Misunderstandings may occur. |
| Superior | Able to read with almost complete comprehension and at normal speed expository prose on unfamiliar subjects and a variety of literary texts. Reading ability is not dependent on subject matter knowledge, although the reader is not expected to comprehend thoroughly texts which are highly dependent on knowledge of the target culture. Reads easily for pleasure. Superior-level texts feature hypotheses, argumentation and supported opinions and include grammatical patterns and vocabulary ordinarily encountered in academic/professional reading. At this level, due to the control of general vocabulary and structure, the reader is almost always able to match the meanings derived from extralinguistic knowledge with meanings derived from knowledge of the language, allowing for smooth and efficient reading of diverse texts. Occasional misunderstandings may still occur; for example, the reader may experience some difficulty with unusually complex structures and low-frequency idioms. At the Superior level the reader can match strategies, top-down or bottom-up, which are most appropriate to the text. (Top-down strategies rely on real-world knowledge and prediction based on genre and organizational scheme of the text. Bottom-up strategies rely on actual linguistic knowledge.) Material at this level will include a variety of literary texts, editorials, correspondence, general reports and technical material in professional fields. Rereading is rarely necessary, and misreading is rare. |
| Distinguished | Able to read fluently and accurately most styles and forms of the language pertinent to academic and professional needs. Able to relate inferences in the text to real-world knowledge and understand almost all sociolinguistic and cultural references by processing language from within the cultural framework. Able to understand a writer's use of nuance and subtlety. Can readily follow unpredictable turns of thought and author intent in such materials as sophisticated editorials, specialized journal articles, and literary texts such as novels, plays, poems, as well as in any subject matter area directed to the general reader. |

## Generic Descriptions–Writing

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| Novice-Low | Able to form some letters in an alphabetic system. In languages whose writing systems use syllabaries or characters, writer is able to both copy and produce the basic strokes. Can produce romanization of isolated characters, where applicable. |

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| Novice-Mid | Able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases and reproduce some from memory. No practical communicative writing skills. |
| Novice-High | Able to write simple fixed expressions and limited memorized material and some recombinations thereof. Can supply information on simple forms and documents. Can write names, numbers, dates, own nationality, and other simple autobiographical information as well as some short phrases and simple lists. Can write all the symbols in an alpahbetic or syllabic system or 50-100 characters or compounds in a character writing system. Spelling and representation of symbols (letters, syllables, characters) may be partially correct. |
| Intermediate-Low | Able to meet limited practical writing needs. Can write short messages, postcards, and take down simple notes, such as telephone messages. Can create statements or questions within the scope of limited language experience. Material produced consists of recombinations of learned vocabulary and structures into simple sentences on very familiar topics. Language is inadequate to express in writing anything but elementary needs. Frequent errors in grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and in formation of nonalphabetic symbols, but writing can be understood by natives used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Intermediate-Mid | Able to meet a number of practical writing needs. Can write short, simple letters. Content involves personal preferences, daily routine, everyday events, and other topics grounded in personal experience. Can express present time or at least one other time frame or aspect consistently, e.g., nonpast, habitual, imperfective. Evidence of control of the syntax of noncomplex sentences and basic inflectional morphology, such as declensions and conjugation. Writing tends to be a loose collection of sentences or sentence fragments on a given topic and provides little evidence of conscious organization. Can be understood by natives used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Intermediate-High | Able to meet most practical writing needs and limited social demands. Can take notes in some detail on familiar topics and respond in writing to personal questions. Can write simple letters, brief synopses and paraphrases, summaries of biographical data, work and school experience. In those languages relying primarily on content words and time expressions to express time, tense, or aspect, some precision is displayed; where tense and/or aspect is expressed through verbal inflection, forms are produced rather consistently, but not always accurately. An ability to describe and narrate in paragraphs is emerging. Rarely uses basic cohesive elements, such as pronominal substitutions or synonyms in written discourse. Writing, though faulty, is generally comprehensible to natives used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Advanced | Able to write routine social correspondence and join sentences in simple discourse of at least several paragraphs in length on familiar topics. Can write simple social correspondence, take notes, write cohesive summaries and resumes, as well as narratives and descriptions of a factual nature. Has sufficient writing vocabulary to express self simply with some circumlocution. May still make errors in punctuation, spelling, or the formation of nonalphabetic symbols. Good control of the morphology and the most frequently used syntactic structures, e.g., common word order patterns, coordination, subordination, but makes frequent errors in producing complex sentences. Uses a limited number of cohesive devices, such as pronouns, accurately. Writing may resemble literal translations from the native language, but a sense of organization (rhetorical structure) is emerging. Writing is understandable to natives not used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to write about a variety of topics with significant precision and in detail. Can write most social and informal business correspondence. Can describe and narrate personal experiences fully but has difficulty supporting points of view in written discourse. Can write about the concrete aspects of topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Often shows remarkable fluency and ease of expression, but under time constraints and pressure writing may be inaccurate. Generally strong in either grammar or vocabulary, but not in both. Weakness and unevenness in one of the foregoing or in spelling or character writing formation may result in occasional miscommunication. Some misuse of vocabulary may still be evident. Style may still be obviously foreign. |
| Superior | Able to express self effectively in most formal and informal writing on practical, social and professional topics. Can write most types of correspondence, such as memos as well as social and business letters, and short research papers and statements of position in areas of special interest or in special fields. Good control of a full range of structures, spelling or nonalphabetic symbol production, and a wide general vocabulary allow the writer to hypothesize and present arguments or points of view accurately and effectively. An underlying organization, such as chronological ordering, logical ordering, cause and effect, comparison, and thematic development is strongly evident, although not thoroughly executed and/or not totally reflecting target language patterns. Although sensitive to differences in formal and informal style, still may not tailor writing precisely to a variety of purposes and/or readers. Errors in writing rarely disturb natives or cause miscommunication. |

# Appendix 2

## Additional Test Descriptions

1. The Bahia Oral Language Test (BOLT), available in English and Spanish, requires students to produce grammatical structures in the language tested. The structures are elicited by means of student responses to questions and pictures (a city scene, a family at home, a cat chased into a tree by a dog). The test is scored according to whether or not a particular grammatical item, such as an irregular or regular plural, a possessive form, a particular verb tense, is used correctly.

2. The Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM), available in several languages, is also a test of language structures. As in the BOLT, the child's responses are elicited by questions about cartoon-type pictures (fat and thin people, a boat with a fisherman, a king about to eat). The test is scored according to whether the expected grammatical element is "well-formed," or correct.

3. The Bilingual Inventory of Natural Languages (BINL), available in English and Spanish, requires students to answer questions about photographs of neighborhood, home, and school activities. Students' responses are recorded and the language samples are scored according to these criteria: the number of words used; completeness of sentences; the use of specific grammatical forms such as articles, possessive and demonstrative pronouns, objectives and adverbs; and the use of subordinate clauses.

4. The Language Assessment Battery (LAB), developed by the New York City Board of Education and available in English and Spanish, is comprised of tests of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. In the speaking section, students are expected to answer everyday questions, name body parts, and complete sentences on the same model as that given by the tester. The speaking test is scored according to the various grammatical forms used.

5. The Language Assessment Scale (LAS), available in English and Spanish, contains measures of phonemic and grammatical production and requires the student to retell a story. The story retelling task is then scored according to a rating scale.

6. P-rating system.

This system is based on the premise that the teacher is the single most valuable source of information about student language proficiency. Using guidelines drafted for this system in the areas of accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension the teacher can relatively quickly evaluate students' oral language proficiency. This system was based on the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) rating scale and is an overall judgment of speaking ability.

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